New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

Volume X, Number 7 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of March 7, 1949

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"Two Blind Mice"

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, INC., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Two Blind Mice"

New York World-Telegram

MARCH 3, 1949

'Two Blind Mice' Grope for Hilarity

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The new light comedy contender, "Two Blind Mice" is a frothy piece with a peculiarly timely attitude made possible by the Hoover report on government economy.

The setup here concerns a federal Office of Seeds and Standards which has been legally abolished for five years, but rambles peacefully on with two elderly women at the helm. One is the widow of the man who started it, and she considers the abolishment an affront to his dignity.

An impertinent ex-newspaperman, also ex-husband of the widow's niece, decides this is perfect material for an experiment. He inveigles into believing they are assigned to the office, members of the Navy, Army, Air Force and State Departments, and under the guise of elaborate security prevents their finding out what is actually going on.

He all but lands the whole crew in jail, but with the aid of an embarrassing photo, saves everybody's job through the influence of the same Senator who abolished the office in the first place.

Situations Humorous.

This is a play where the humor of situation is a great deal funnier than the wit of the lines. Consequently it takes plenty of windup before it throws off much hilarity. Floundering out of the web is much more entertaining than spinning it was.

There is plenty of satric comment here on all branches of the government and the services, though it is not often phrased as brightly as it might be.

The State Department representative stoutly maintains he can write a report while knowing nothing about his subject. It is stated that no one in the government thinks for himself. There is presented the prospect of a naval courier on a top-secret mission with nothing but a pair of old pants in his brief case.

Topping all this irony of course, is the picture of two old ladies pouring seeds into envelopes; while they rent rooms in their office to a tailor, a dancing teacher and a young homeless couple. For this great effort, they are dined by the President and decorated with the French Legion of Honor. The most biting idea of all is that when the hero insists the whole idea is a hoax, no one will believe him.

Douglas Central Figure.

Melvyn Douglas plays the central figure with the mischievous lightness that has so often characterized his picture work in recent years. He keeps the play on its keel and consistently builds up his fellow actors.

Mabel Paige is a saucy white-topped bird as the more talkative of the two ladies, dressing up her lines with artful gestures and expressions, and Laura Pierpont is a matter of fact widow with a bee in her bonnet.

Jan Sterling makes an attractive exasperated niece, and Richard Kendrick brings a fine comic composity to the role of her current fiance. Elliott Reid has a couple of particularly effective scenes as the eager ensign, and there is able and characteristic assistance from Geoffrey Lumb, Raymond Bramley, Walter Brooke, Robert Pike, Howard St. John and Frank Tweddell.

'TWO BLIND MICE'

Play by Samuel Spewack; setting by Albert Johnson; costumes by Natalie Barth Walker; staged by Samuel Spewack; presented by Archer King and Harrison Woodhull at the Cort Theatre, March 2, 1949. The cast:

Mrs. Letitia Turnbull.....Laura Pierpont
Miss Crystal Hower.....Mabel Paige
Mr. Murray.....Roland Wood
Miss Johnson.....Jane Hoffman
Mailman.....Howard Fischer
Tommy Thurston.....Melvyn Douglas
A Visitor.....Robert P. Lieb
Simon.....Alonzo Bosan
Karen Norwood.....Jan Sterling
Wilbur F. Threadwaite.....Geoffrey Lumb
Major John Groh, U.S.A.....Raymond Bramley
Lt.-Col. Robbins, U.S.A.F.....Walter Brooke
Comdr. Thomas Jellico, U.S.N.....Robert Pike
Dr. Henry McGill.....Richard Kendrick
Sergeant.....Robert Webber
Charles Brenner.....Howard St. John
Ensign Jamison, U.S.N.....Elliott Reid
Senator Kruger.....Frank Tweddell

Journal-American

MARCH 3, 1949

It Isn't as Funny As It Attempts to Be

By ROBERT GARLAND

Let's hope that our enemies, wherever they may be, don't take the insistant implications of "Two Blind Mice" seriously. In his new comedy at the Cort, Samuel Spewack, without benefit of Bella, pokes a bettering ram of not-very-funny fun at most things Washingtonian, from the Capitol to the White House and back again. The non-American rights to Mr. Spewack's belittling should be worth a fortune.

Uncle Sam again proves that he can take it, although, as the needling persists, you wonder why he's expected to be so obsequious. But, as represented by his nieces and nephews in the first-night congregation, he doesn't seem to mind the ridiculing of his government in general and his Army, Navy, Air Force, Senate, Congress, National Security, First Lady and Chief Executive in particular.

Not finding Samuel Spewack's mockery as mirthful as expected, I spend the long last act jotting down the objects of the playwright's ridicule on the margins of my program. Other than those already mentioned, I find the State Department, the Treasury, the Oath of Office, the Secret Service, the Atomic Energy Commission, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the United Nations, West Point, Annapolis.

Come to think of it, the one praiseworthy phrase you hear all evening is in behalf of Lloyd's of London. Of that, Mr. Spewack's spokesman has high, serious-minded things to say. It, you gather, should be a working model for all America, with headquarters in the District of Columbia.

* * *

Satiric Aspects

The premise of Samuel Spewack's Washington whatnot isn't without its satiric aspects. Letitia Turnbull and Crystal Hower, the sightless Mutidae of the title, find themselves in charge of Office of Medicinal Herbs in Washington, D. C. This is odd because, the year being 1949, the bureau was officially done away with in 1944. Senator Kruger ordered its demise.

But, at the rising of the curtain at the Cort, there it is with Mrs. Turnbull and Miss Hower as its sole persisting relics. They, the Hokinsonian old dears, carry on as if their senatorial wiping out weren't legal and of five years' duration. Letitia, as the widow of its founder, and Crystal, her sidekick, love their medicinal herbs and refuse to live without them.

So they burn their pay checks and make two ends meet by renting out the spare rooms of their office as a maternity ward, a dancing school, a rehearsal hall and a pants pressing emporium. And the lovely old garden of their lovely old mansion is a parking lot. They're doing all right until a senatorial investigation sets in. And Tommy Thurston and his former wife set in with it.

It's then that what started out to be a sort of Gilbertian spoofing of American bureaucracy becomes a mockery of our government as, from the Capitol to the White House and back again, it does what it can to make a war-weary world safe for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

* * *

Thanks to the Rat

At the end, however, the mice that are Letitia Turnbull and Crystal Hower return into their own. Thanks to the rat that is Tommy Thurston, Senator Kruger is blackmailed into putting the lost Office of Medicinal Herbs on the government map again. As the curtain falls, the much-too-gentle women once more put little seeds into big envelopes as Boy gets Girl.

The Boy, Tommy Thurston, who finds his fun in making monkeys out of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and any other government arm, is played by the Melvyn Douglas who, after 14 years, returns to Broadway and has himself some real mean fun. Nobody but even Mr. Douglas, could be as charming as his Mr. Thurston is supposed to be. But he does all right by himself and his belittling.

Laura Pierpont and Mabel Paige are happily Hokinsonian as the title's genteel rodents. Jan Sterling is the Girl the Boy gets. So openly is her Karen Norwood after Mr. Douglas' Tommy Thurston that it's all she can do to wait until the final stanza's finish. Of the sappy majors, colonels, commanders, ensigns and sergeants, Walter Brooke's airman is the unsappiest.

Maybe I'd find "Two Blind Mice" funnier if I didn't believe that this isn't the best of times for the farcical belittlement of most things Washingtonian. Not that I'm really worried. Uncle Sam I'm sure, will be around a good deal longer than Samuel Spewack's play.

Daily Mirror

MARCH 3, 1949

'Two Blind Mice' Proves Robust Laugh Riot

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Samuel Spewack applies a hilarious slapstick to bureaucracy in "Two Blind Mice," which Archer King and Harrison Woodhull launched at the Cort Theatre last evening. Government has become so overgrown and confused, thinks the author, that it is quite possible for a little department or two to exist without authorization.

The Hoover Commission to reform government may issue more authentic and serious studies of waste and frustration, but we believe that you won't get anywhere near the fun from them—that is to be obtained from the tongue-in-cheek Spewack report.

The playwright presents the case of a couple of elderly ladies who continue to operate the Office of Seeds and Standards in Washington long after it has been abolished by Congressional action. Due to a procedural lapse, they are allowed to carry on activities in their quarters and are sent their paychecks as usual.

The latter they burn and, having honest hearts, they even manage to earn a few dollars for the government's conscience fund by leasing space in their building to a pants presser, a rumba teacher and an expectant mother. A prankish newspaperman, delighted by their initiative and high purpose, extricates them from their difficulties at the expense of top brass—and recaptures an ex-wife in the bargain.

Scripter Spewack, doubling in brass as director, has paced the zany frolic at express-train speed. Melvyn Douglas, as the sardonic reporter, gives the performance terrific drive, and sparks it into a laugh riot.

Laura Pierpont and Mabel Paige are delightful as the elderly, well-meaning innocents. Jan Sterling is an attractive aid to Douglas in the romantic department. Citations also are due Geoffrey Lumb, Raymond Bramley, Richard Kendrick, Howard St. John, Elliott Reid and Frank Tweddell.

Albert Johnson's setting is useful and atmospherically satiric.

"Two Blind Mice" isn't going to win any literacy prizes, but it is going to make a lot of customers howl gleefully and perhaps even weigh the annual governmental budget a little more thoughtfully. Heck, if it does that, why shouldn't it lasso a prize or two?

The Spewack lark kept the first nighters roaring throughout the evening.

The Sun

MARCH 3, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE

Frail Comedy at Cort.

"Two Blind Mice," put on last evening at the Cort, takes jabs at bureaucracy in Washington and the foibles of a preoccupied Government, and it starts with a rather funny idea and a moderately lively first act. It isn't too much fun after that.

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Samuel Spewack, already given billing on the town's houseboards for part authorship of "Kiss Me, Kate," that million-dollar business at the Century, wrote and staged "Two Blind Mice." He had the notion for an engaging comedy, that of a lost government department which continues functioning because of a clerical error. But "Two Blind Mice" goes steadily downhill, and it becomes a labored and clamorous affair at the finish.

The author spins a thinnish tale of two elderly ladies, mildly batty, who are still operating the Office of Seeds and Standards, which was established during Theodore Roosevelt's administration, five years after it has been officially abolished. They dutifully burn their Treasury Department checks instead of cashing them, and they buy their own stamps. They pick up a bit of sideline money from an adjoining parking lot, and by renting space to a pants presser and to a rumba teacher.

Exposure seems imminent just as a dauntless Washington reporter, a fellow with a whimsical turn of mind, comes to the aid of the old girls. He gets them invited to the White House, decorated by the French and keeps them and their bureau in business. He also works out an old romance of his own, winning his former wife all over again. He's just that irresistible.

Melvyn Douglas is brisk and easy in his playing of the role of resourceful Tommy Thurston. Mabel Paige and Laura Pierpont are immensely amusing and succeed in making characters of the eccentric ladies, who dawdle lovingly over jars of seeds and herbs and bring on some commotion about the possibilities of herbilogical warfare. Frank Tweddell storms about as the bumptious senator who had actually abolished the herb-and-seed bureau.

Jan Sterling strives to put some spirit into one of the silliest ingenue roles of the season. There are good enough performances in the farcical tradition from Geoffrey Lumb, Raymond Bramley, Howard St. John, Robert Pike and Richard Kendrick, and a definitely amusing one is contributed by Elliott Reid, playing a bewildered ensign.

"Two Blind Mice," which makes the point that there are imperfections here and there in the operation of a democracy, is a negligible comedy. The joke wears out after the first act.

New York Post

HOME NEWS

MARCH 3, 1949

A Joke on Washington That Runs Rather Thin

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

Having spent grim wartime years in government agencies, Samuel Spewack has a cold and contemptuous eye for Washington bureaucracy, and, in "Two Blind Mice," which opened at the Cort Theatre last night, he has written a satirical comedy that mocks its various idiocies in knowing, scornful and surprisingly good-natured terms. With Melvyn Douglas and a good cast acting it expertly, the new play has some amusing and agreeably malicious scenes, but it is too lean and tenuous in its mockery to provide a consistently stimulating evening.

Taking red tape, governmental double-talk, security regulations, Congress, the armed services, the press, and the antics of the cold war as some of his targets, Mr. Spewack begins placidly enough by telling of two nice old ladies who have refused to allow their particular department to be liquidated. They had been running the Office of Seeds and Standards since the days of Theodore Roosevelt, and they weren't going to let a whim of Congress, which had voted to abolish the bureau, put a stop to their activities.

To the Rescue

To their rescue comes Mr. Douglas, a dashing and romantic newspaperman right out of the movies, who pretends that the nice old ladies are engaged in top-secret experiments in herbological warfare, and fools the Army, Navy, Air Force and State Department into backing him up. Indeed, he goes further than that in his somewhat elaborate joke. Before he has finished, the girls have been received at tea by President Truman, given the Legion of Honor by the French Embassy, and, greatest feat of all, have taken in an eminent Washington correspondent of a great New York daily.

From time to time, the result is brisk and pointed lampooning, but I am afraid that too frequently the pace stops long enough to allow one to realize that the joke runs pretty thin. In addition, it strikes me that, while Mr. Spewack is primarily concerned with having wry fun at the expense of the pompous nonsense of government bureaucracy, his victims are chiefly several harmless and entirely well-meaning Washington underlings, rather than the more legitimate targets higher up. It seems he might better have concentrated on the bigger game.

The Newspaper Man

That newspaper man, played by Mr. Douglas, bothered me a bit, too. The returned film star gives an expert and attractive performance, but the prankish reporter, with his debonair impudence, his rakish charm and his devil-may-care abandon in love and journalism, is too familiar a figure in Hollywood, where virtually all the handsome leading men, including Mr. Douglas, have acted him to death, to be a satisfactory hero any more. His sardonic courting of his ex-wife is also over-familiar screen stuff.

The two old ladies are engagingly played by Mabel Paige and Laura Pierpont, while Richard Kendrick as the ex-wife's fiance, Geoffrey Lumb as a stuffy State Department man, Raymond Bramley as a bewildered major, Howard St. John as the self-satisfied Washington correspondent and Elliott Reid as a callow ensign are particularly helpful in minor roles. "Two Blind Mice" certainly has its comic points, and the author has staged it with the proper liveliness, but its mockery is only intermittently satisfying.